

Bluefin surge: Best season start in years

by Lorelei Stevens

HARWICH, MA – The harpoon fishery for bluefin tuna was on fire during the beginning of June, raising hopes for a good commercial season for the first time in a long time.

As of June 12, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reported harpoon category landings of 109 fish with an average round weight of 262 pounds.

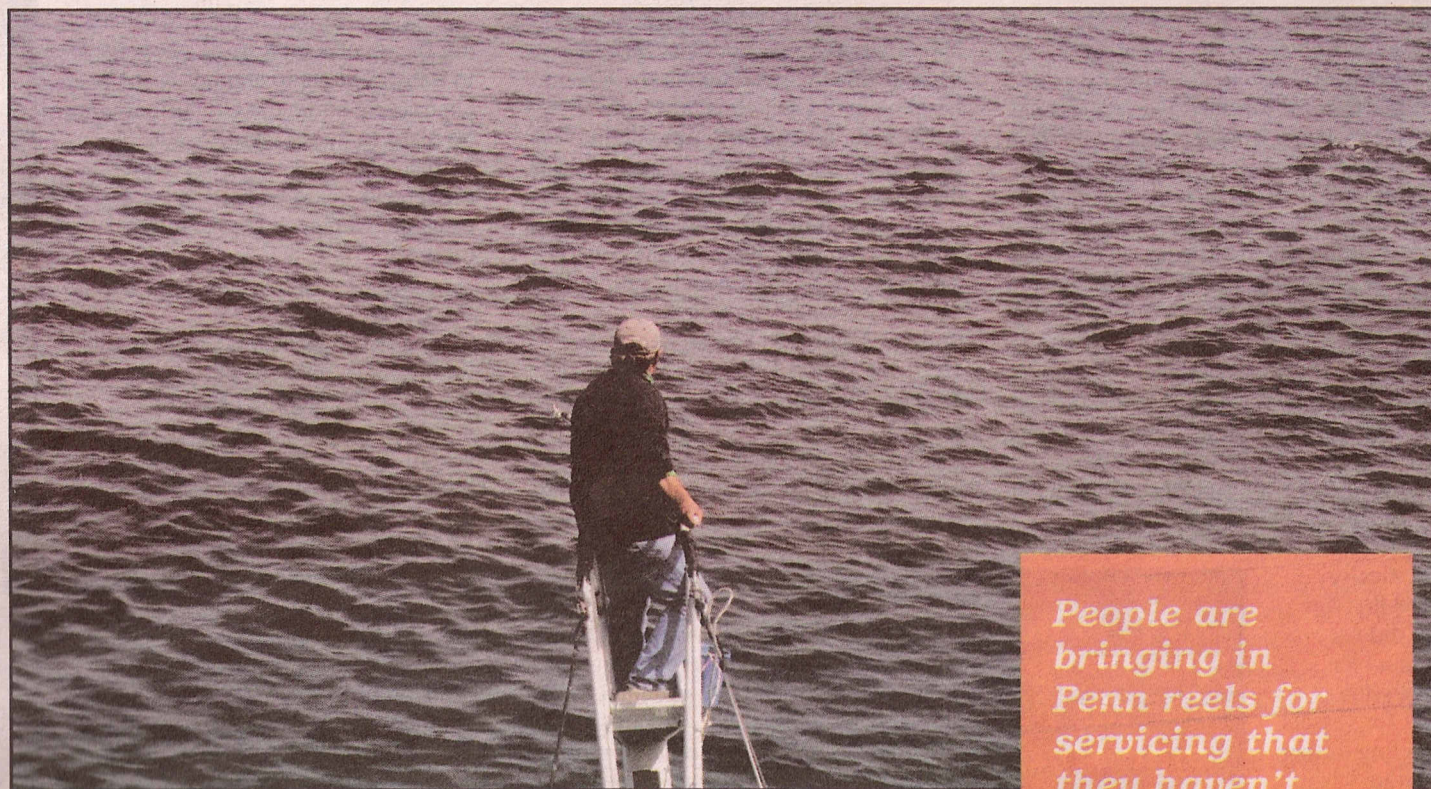
General category landings totaled 65 fish with an average round weight of 256 pounds. The length of the fish went from the upper 70" range to the middle 80" range.

The first two fish of the season were caught on opening day, June 1, by Michael Pratt of Green Harbor, MA, "with marginal weather and minimal participation in fishing," according to Rich Ruais of the East Coast Tuna Association.

In the days that followed, a few fish were taken around Cape Cod but, for the most part, the action by midmonth was north of the Cape, with Perkins Cove, ME, Ogunquit, ME, and Gloucester offloading the most fish, according to NMFS.

Chris Weiner, who is part of a family of experienced harpooners, said fishermen were seeing bluefin everywhere in the Gulf of Maine.

"We have a very large body of fish that we have not seen in a long time and there's no doubt why – there are lots herring and other bait around," he said. "Everyone's doing well right now, seeing a lot of fish and catching them, too. Boats that we haven't seen for a few



Steve Weiner in the pulpit, with a bunch of about 20 giants lined up. Eleven or 12 fish may be visible in the photo.

years are back on the scene and people are optimistic. It's great to see."

Pete Mourmouras of Saco Bay Tackle Co. of Saco, ME said his shop was getting a lot of extra business due to the bite.

"People are bringing in Penn reels for servicing that they haven't used in awhile," he said. "There's a lot of stick boat action right now out on the northern side of Jeffreys and some on Stellwagen."

Touchy market

Dealers, too, were excited over the prospect of good catches, though their enthusiasm was somewhat tempered by worries about the market.

While a few of the very early fish did OK, with a couple exported

to Japan returning around \$8 per pound to the boat, it didn't last. Most dealers reported prices of around \$4-\$6 per pound with a few going a little higher.

Bob Campbell of the Yankee Fishermen's Co-op in Seabrook, NH said the co-op had handled 20 fish as of June 12 and got two more the following day, despite a stretch of bad weather.

"The size range has been between 145 and 260 pounds," he said. "The fish are typical early fish with nice color, mostly, and no fat."

Campbell added that all the fish had been sold domestically, returning \$4.25-\$7.75 per pound to the boat.

Robert Fitzpatrick of Chatham-based Maguro America added that the volume of bluefin landed this early in the season was exceptionally high.

"It's never happened this early at this

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—Pete Mourmouras

level," he said in mid-June. "Fortunately, they're starting to show some fat."

The real challenge will be dealing with weak global demand for even the best seafood, according to Andy Baler of Nantucket Fish Co., based in Dennis and Chatham, MA.

"The tuna market a week ago was strong," he said on June 12. "But as soon as landings started coming in, things went bad. Worldwide, if there's any volume, forget it. It's the same with groundfish. These are some of the worst prices we've ever seen."

On a more positive note, Baler added that fishermen who started off around the Cape reported seeing huge numbers of bluefin too small to sell, which bodes well for future years.

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Ben Weiner photo

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—Chris Weiner

Tuna market

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"The bodies of 40" to 50" fish were incredible," he said.

Tag-a-Giant

As always, bluefin tuna research continues to be heavily endorsed and supported by the industry. The "Tag-a-Giant" program, pioneered by researcher Barbara Block of Stanford University, has deployed some 1,600 pop-up satellite (PSAT) and archival tags since 1994 and was reporting exciting news in mid-June.

According to Shana Miller of the program, the tags placed on two giants in Canada in October had just popped up off the east coast of Florida. The data indicated that both fish had traveled to the Gulf of Mexico and the tags popped off within six miles of each other, hinting that the fish were traveling close together.

A tag from another fish also tagged in Canada popped up near the Bahamas.

Miller asked fishermen to be on the lookout for tags, including archival tags implanted in the bodies of bluefin.

"The data are really important to show how our fishery here in the US is affected by eastern fishing," Miller said.

"The more we can show that effect, the stronger our argument is that (eastern countries) need to bring their fisheries into compliance" with international conservation agreements.

The Tag-a-Giant program also is conducting genetic work on bluefin. Fishermen can help by obtaining sampling kits and collecting tiny bits of fins for analysis.

For more information on the program, visit the Tag-a-Giant Foundation web site at <www.tagagiant.org> or call (866) 533-3580.

UNH research

Molly Lutcavage of the Large Pelagics Research Center (LPRC) at the University of New Hampshire reported that she and the other scientists on her team had been out in June collecting biological samples.

Though hit hard by federal funding cuts, Lutcavage has been touring the New England region talking to fishermen about bluefin and raising money to keep the research going.

She recently spoke at a sold-out seminar hosted by the New Hampshire Chapter of the Coastal Conservation

Association (NH-CCA), an event that raised more than \$5,000.

"NH-CCA has been incredibly helpful in attempting to keep our bluefin research funded," Lutcavage said.

Although the future of the center is at this time unknown, the work continues. Lutcavage and crew plan this season to continue their Tag-a-Tiny program. They also will once again work with Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canadian fishermen Eric, Joel, and Camille Jacquard, Chris Mallone, and Ewan Clark, and US fishermen Cookie Murray, John Caldwell, and Scott

Drabinowicz to place PSAT tags on giants.

Other work includes two joint projects with colleagues in Spain – a juvenile food-habits study and an implanted archival tagging project.

"In the past three years, there have been at least two or three juvenile bluefin tagged by Spanish colleagues that were recaptured off Chatham," Lutcavage said.

More information on the work of the LPRC is available online at <www.largepelagics.unh.edu> or by calling Lutcavage at (603) 862-2891 or e-mailing her at <molly.lutcavage@unh.edu>. ■

NOVAs issued to Ogunquit chefs, fishermen for illegal bluefin sales

GLOUCESTER, MA – Federal prosecutors issued notices of violation and assessments (NOVAs) on May 5 to a number of Ogunquit, ME-area restaurants, chefs, and commercial fishermen for illegal sale and purchase of bluefin tuna in July of 2007.

The buzz around the alleged infractions was intense within the industry during the winter of 2008, with a number of fishermen wondering when they were going to hear about the charges in the scandal they jokingly called "tunagate."

Following the year-and-a-half long investigation and review, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Office of General Counsel handed down the following NOVAs:

● Jackie's Top Restaurant, Ogunquit

been aware that there had been episodes of "back-door" sales to restaurants around Ogunquit over the years when the bite was on in the area. This time, however, the agency received complaints from people in the fishing industry.

"Ogunquit is not unique, but for a few years we've had reports of a problem and, this time, we were able to document our cases," he said. "We found evidence that sublegal-sized fish were taken and sold."

The fish involved had been loined, Schoppmeyer said, adding that the chefs, who did not have the required Atlantic tuna dealer permits, should have known better than to purchase them.

"When you're in the business of buying seafood, it's your responsibility to buy from reputable purveyors. There's a